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THE GREEK POLITICAL
TRADITION

As with all the classical civilizations, the culture that developed along Europe's Mediterranean shores produced important political institutions and principles. The key political form, in Greece and later in republican Rome, was the city-state. Within its bounds, the portion of the population with political rights was supposed to participate actively in the affairs of state, to which it owed loyalty and service. Within this context, however, a variety of political structures arose. Some evolved toward democracy (although with many residents excluded from rights). As we will see in the next chapter, Athens led the way. Here, it provided not only participant assemblies but also considerable support for individual freedom and legal rights. Other Greek city-states, however, stressed the power of government. Sparta, which would finally clash with Athens in the Peloponnesian War, set up a rigid militaristic regime designed to transform each male or female citizen into an absolute servant of the government. When Athens and Sparta warred at the end of the 5th century B.C.E., the conflict involved not only power but also two clashing views of political life.

The Spartan system, described in this selection, was set up by the lawmaker Lycurgus after 650 B.C.E., in large part to keep a vast slave (helot) population under control. The description comes from the writings of Plutarch (ca. 45–125 C.E.) in a biography of Lycurgus. It is important to realize that most articulate Greeks esteemed Spartan values, preferring them to democracy. Why might this be so? What resulted, in classical Greece itself and in the later Greek heritage, from such sharply differentiated systems within a common culture?

PLUTARCH ON SPARTA

In order to [promote] the good education of their youth (which . . . he [Lycurgus] thought the most important and noblest work of a lawgiver), he went so far back as to take into consideration their very conception and birth, by regulating their

From Plutarch, *The Library of Original Sources*, Vol. II: *The Greek World*, ed. Oliver J. Thatcher (University Research Extension Co., Milwaukee, WI: 1915), pp. 118–119, 122, 128.

marriages. For Aristotle is wrong in saying, that, after he had tried all ways to reduce the women to more modesty and sobriety, he was at last forced to leave them as they were, because that, in the absence of their husbands, who spent the best part of their lives in the wars, their wives, whom they were obliged to leave absolute mistresses at home, took great liberties and assumed the superiority; and were treated with overmuch respect and called by the title of lady or queen. The truth is, he took in their case, also, all the care that was possible; he ordered the maidens to exercise themselves with wrestling, running, throwing and quoit [throwing game], and casting the dart, to the end that the fruit they conceived might, in strong and healthy bodies, take firmer root and find better growth, and withal that they, with this greater vigor, might be the more able to undergo the pains of childbearing. And to the end he might take away their over great tenderness and fear of exposure to the air, and all acquired womanishness, he ordered that the young women should go naked in the processions, as well as the young men, and dance, too, in that condition, at certain solemn feasts, singing certain songs, whilst the young men stood around, seeing and hearing them. On these occasions, they now and then made, by jests, a befitting reflection upon those who had misbehaved themselves in the wars; and again sang praises upon those who had done any gallant action, and by these means inspired the younger sort with an emulation of their glory. Those that were thus commended went away proud, elated, and gratified with their honor among the maidens; and those who were rallied were as sensibly touched with it as if they had been formally reprimanded; and so much the more, because the kings and the elders, as well as the rest of the city, saw and heard all that passed. Nor was there anything shameful in this nakedness of the young women; modesty attended them, and all wantonness was excluded. It taught them simplicity and a care for good health, and gave them some taste of higher feelings, admitted as they thus were to the field of noble action and glory. Hence it was natural for them to think and speak as Gorgo, for example, the wife of Leonidas, is said to have done, when some foreign lady, as it would seem, told her that the women of Lacedæmon were the only women of the world who could rule men; "With good reason," she said, "for we are the only women who bring forth men."

These public processions of the maidens, and their appearing naked in their exercises and dancings, were incitements to marriage, operating upon the young with the rigor and certainty, as Plato says, of love, if not of mathematics. But besides all this, to promote it yet more effectually, those who continued bachelors were in a degree disfranchised by law; for they were excluded from the sight of those public processions in which the young men and maidens danced naked, and, in winter-time, the officers compelled them to march naked themselves round the marketplace, singing as they went a certain song to their own disgrace, that they justly suffered this punishment for disobeying the laws. Moreover, they were denied that respect and observance which the younger men paid their elders; and no man, for example, found fault with what was said to Dercyllidas, though so eminent a commander; upon whose approach one day, a young man, instead of rising, retained his seat, remarking, "No child of yours will make room for me." . . .

Nor was it lawful, indeed, for the father himself to breed up the children after his own fancy; but as soon as they were seven years old, they were to be enrolled in

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certain companies and classes, where they all lived under the same order and discipline, doing their exercises and taking their play together. Of these, he who showed the most conduct and courage was made captain; they had their eyes always upon him, obeyed his orders, and underwent patiently whatsoever punishment he inflicted; so that the whole course of their education was one continued exercise of a ready and perfect obedience. The old men, too, were spectators of their performances, and often raised quarrels and disputes among them, to have a good opportunity of finding out their different characters, and of seeing which would be valiant, which a coward, when they should come to more dangerous encounters. Reading and writing they gave them, just enough to serve their turn; their chief care was to make them good subjects, and to teach them to endure pain and conquer in battle. To this end, as they grew in years, their discipline was proportionately increased; their heads were close-clipped, they were accustomed to go bare-foot, and for the most part to play naked.

After they were twelve years old, they were no longer allowed to wear any undergarment; they had one coat to serve them a year; their bodies were hard and dry, with but little acquaintance of baths and unguents; these human indulgences they were allowed only on some few particular days in the year. They lodged together in little bands upon beds made of the rushes which grew by the banks of the river Eurotas, which they were to break off with their hands without a knife; if it were winter, they mingled some thistle-down with their rushes, which it was thought had the property of giving warmth. By the time they were come to this age, there was not any of the more hopeful boys who had not a lover to bear him company. The old men, too, had an eye upon them, coming often to the grounds to hear and see them contend either in wit or strength with one another, and this as seriously and with as much concern as if they were their fathers, their tutors, or their magistrates; so that there scarcely was any time or place without some one present to put them in mind of their duty, and punish them if they had neglected it. . . .

Their discipline continued still after they were full-grown men. No one was allowed to live after his own fancy; but the city was a sort of camp, in which every man had his share of provisions and business set out, and looked upon himself not so much born to serve his own ends as the interest of his country. Therefore, if they were commanded nothing else, they went to see the boys perform their exercises, to teach them something useful, or to learn it themselves of those who knew better. And, indeed, one of the greatest and highest blessings Lycurgus procured his people was the abundance of leisure, which proceeded from his forbidding to them the exercise of any mean and mechanical trade. Of the money-making that depends on troublesome going about and seeing people and doing business, they had no need at all in a state where wealth obtained no honor or respect. The Helots tilled their ground for them, and paid them yearly in kind the appointed quantity, without any trouble of theirs. To this purpose there goes a story of a Lacedæmonian [Spartan] who, happening to be at Athens when the courts were sitting, was told of a citizen that had been fined for living an idle life, and was being escorted home in much distress of mind by his condoling friends; the Lacedæmonian was much surprised at it, and desired his friend to show him the man who was condemned for living like a freeman. So much beneath them did they esteem the frivolous devotion of time and attention to the mechanical arts and to money-making.

- it? Was the Spartan family system patriarchal?
2. What was the Spartan system of military recruitment and motivation for service?
 3. Do you agree with historians who have argued that Sparta was a forerunner of contemporary government systems, or would this be a misleading assessment?
 4. How did Spartan political principles compare with Confucian ideals and goals? How did Spartan values compare with Legalism? (See Chapters 7 and 9.)

ESSAY SUGGESTIONS

- A. Using this document and textbook coverage, explain the main *causes* of the distinctive Spartan social and political system.
- B. Why did Confucianism prove to be more successful than Spartan principles in providing the basis for a durable strong state?

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